



311

I Feel Alive (When You're Beside Me) by doritoFace1q

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Summary: Nothing ever happens in Asgard. Why would it? A sleepy Indiana town, notable for nothing but an unfortunate school mascot and an inconspicuous, boring research lab, seemingly producing nothing but new cough drops month after month. Nothing ever happens in Asgard. Until something does. Stucky and Ironstrange. Stranger Things AU.

1. This World Will Never Be What I Expected

Oh, look! Something not Attack on Titan!

This is my first MCU fanfiction, so, naturally, I had to make it a crossover :) This is basically Season 1 of Stranger Things, but changed to fit both the characters. Please note that this is not canon compliant, because I really only wanted to write S1. Therefore, Will/Peter's connection to the Upside Down isn't going to exist ☐(° ~ °)☐

Hawkins is Asgard, but only in name. The town's the same as in the show. Jotunheim's a bigger city about half an hour's drive away.

Title is from Time of Dying by Three Days Grace

I wanted to put Clint in this, and make Natasha Max, but then I remembered that I've never watched a full movie with him in it (I'm such a fake fan, wow), and that I really don't want to write anything past Season 1. So we've got Nat, instead.

Whee.

Clip-clop clip-clop clip-clop.

Loose blonde ringlets bounced in time with the frantic clacking of high heels on cold tile, the lights overhead flickering as the doctor raced down the halls.

Clip-clop clip-clop cli—snap!

A stream of curses that would have made a sailor blush burst forth, and the woman gasped in a mixture of pain and horror as she landed on her knees, the thin heel of her left shoe snapped cleanly in half. She fumbled, hands shaking, as she yanked both pieces of footwear off, letting them skitter across the floor, abandoned.

Crash! The back end of the hallway was thrown into darkness, shards

of shattered plastic raining down amidst a shower of sparks as the fluorescent light fixture exploded. The doctor inhaled sharply, grabbing her fallen briefcase and stumbling to her feet, ignoring the stinging cold and hard slap of bare feet against freezing tile.

A roar echoed through the facility as she skidded to a stop next to the elevator, smacking the keypad, knees knocking, hot and cold washing over her in frantic waves of terror, heart ready to burst from her chest. "Come on, come *on*," she hissed, hitting the *up* button with renewed vigour as another lighting fixture exploded, the darkness jerking ever closer.

The heavy metal doors slid open with a pleasant *ding!* and she rushed in, hitting the *door close* button with just as much, if not, speed, strength, and panic. Another earth-shattering roar shook the floor, and she let out a scream, hitting the button again.

The doors began sliding towards each other, a heavy, grating noise sending goosebumps down her spine as heavy steel dragged against itself. Dr. Deborah Jezebel let out a relieved sigh, slumping against the back wall, chest rising and falling as she regained her breath.

Clang! Debbie nearly jumped out of her skin as the metal roof of the elevator suddenly buckled, a massive dent forming in the sheet of steel. *Clang!* Another dent formed, the elevator creaking. Her face paled and she grabbed the briefcase, stumbling forwards and hitting the *door open* button. "No!" she wailed, hitting it harder as a horrible, screeching noise bore into her skull. She looked up, paling at the sight of a large gash dug into the ceiling.

"No!" She grabbed at the doors of the elevator, fully intent on forcing them open with brute strength alone, but succeeding in nothing but obtaining a number of broken nails. She let out a cry of pain, cradling her hands to her chest. Tears and snot flowed freely down her face as she hit the button with her elbow, entire form shaking with fear.

A high-pitched, eardrum-bursting screech echoed through the tiny space as the ceiling was torn away, the heavy sheet of metal was pulled back like the lid of a tuna can.

The doctor's final scream was cut short as a cold, clammy hand—

fingers long and deformed, inhuman black claws digging into her skin—closed over her skull, yanking her up through the ceiling with enough force to snap her spine.

The doors *dinged* open again as the briefcase landed on the floor with a heavy *thud*.

XXX

Crickets chirped lazily in the night's humid warmth, stars twinkling faintly overhead in the deep blue, late-night sky. "Something's coming." A stray cat rolled over onto its stomach on the sidewalk, tail curling as it stretched its back out before padding away, smudges of grey on its black coat vanishing as it ducked into a bush, leaves rustling. "Something hungry for blood." The cheap, department store stoneware of the surprise mug landed on the rickety, wooden table with a quiet *thud*.

"A shadow grows on the wall behind you," thirteen-year old Steve Rogers declared, surveying his friends, turning his head dramatically as he spoke. "Swallowing you in darkness."

"Shit," Natasha muttered, scratching at the band-aid on her left cheek.

"You can say that again," Sam muttered, leaning forwards, tapping a finger anxiously on the table.

"Shit."

Steve shot them a reproving look before continuing. "*It*," he said, emphasizing the word, "is almost here."

"What?" Peter asked leaning forwards, almost crawling onto the table from the tension of not knowing. "What is it?"

"Two bucks it's a Mind Flayer," Natasha declared, grabbing her mug and taking a long drink. She wiped off her milk mustache on the back of her wrist before leaning forwards again. "*Is* it a Mind Flayer?"

"No way!" Sam protested. "What would a Mind Flayer be doing *here*?"

"What if it's the Demogorgon?" Natasha gasped, eyes widening.

Peter groaned, putting his head in his hands, ruffling his fluffy brown hair. "We're so done if it's the Demogorgon."

"It's not the Demogorgon!" Sam said. "There's no way!"

Steve grinned and his arm shot forwards. He slammed a figurine on the board before leaning back triumphantly. "An army of troglodytes charge into the chamber!"

Peter let out a small *whoop!* and Natasha grinned. "Troglodytes." Sam smirked triumphantly.

Giggles filled the room as fist bumps and high fives were exchanged. Suddenly, Steve's grin fell. "Wait a minute," he muttered, glancing to the side. "Did you hear that?"

Natasha raised an eyebrow, glancing at him. "What?"

"That sound," Steve's brows drew together as he looked from side to side. "It's like. . . crashing. Boom. . . boom. . ." He slammed his hands on the table, the pieces shaking, drinks sloshing around in mugs as the legs shook. "Boom!" Peter jumped, a small squeak escaping him.

"Son of a—" Natasha inhaled deeply. "The *hell*, Rogers?"

Steve shook his head. "That didn't come from troglodytes," he said. "That—that was something else." Sam shot a panicked Peter a worried glance. The table shuddered again as Steve slammed another figurine down on the board. "The Demogorgon!"

Shouts of protest and groans filled the basement. Sam slammed his hands on the table, forehead dropping onto the solid surface with a *clunk*, and Natasha threw her hands in the air. "Oh, come *on!*" Peter groaned, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

"Peter, action!" Steve demanded.

"I—" the youngest of the group's cheeks were growing red as he spluttered, hands flapping in the air. "I don't—!"

"Fireball!" Natasha yelled.

"No way in hell!" Sam shouted back. "He's gotta roll a thirteen or higher for that! Go for a protection spell!"

"Against a *Demogorgon*?" Natasha grabbed the edges of the table, looking like she was seconds from flipping the entire thing. "That's a wimp shit move! Fireball him!"

"Protection!" Sam yelled. Peter looked trapped between screaming and crying—or, possibly, a combination of the both.

Steve slammed his palm on the table. "The Demogorgon is tired of your silly human bickering!" the asthmatic yelled, voice cracking at the end. "It stomps towards you, ready to rip your guts out! Boom!"

"*Fireball!*" Natasha shrieked, raising her voice over Steve's shouts.

"Protection!" Sam raises his voice, yelling over both of them as Peter looked back and forth between all three of them, head snapping in different directions fast enough to give him whiplash.

"Fireball!" Peter yelled, grabbing the dice and throwing them down, squeezing his eyes shut and slamming his hands over his ears. The dice clattered as they bounced off the table, rolling across the floor.

Natasha swore, jumping to her feet and chasing after them, the others hot on her heels. "Where are they?" Sam demanded, dropping to his knees and peering under the stairs.

"Fuck you and your massive basement, Steve Rogers!" Natasha yelled, dropping to her stomach and squeezing one eye shut to look under the steps. "Shit—is it a thirteen?"

"I don't know!" Peter lay on top of the stairs, peering down between the risers. "Ow—!" He yelped as a splinter jabbed into his thumb and winced as he drew his hand away, grimacing at the bead of red.

"Come on, someone find them!" Steve reached beneath the stairs, hand fumbling in the dust. "Those are our last ones, and it'll be days before we go to the store again!"

"Is it a thirteen—?!"

"Steve!" The basement door flew open and Sam bit back a curse as he jolted up, banging his head on a step.

Steve's head shot up. "Mom!" He threw his arms out in protest. "We're in the middle of a campaign!"

Sarah Rogers tilted her head, placing a hand on her hip. "The *end*, you mean," she said. "It's fifteen after." She pointed at the clock on the basement wall, over the patched-up old couch. Steve whirled around to look at it before turning back to her.

"Mom—!" he coughed as he ran up the stairs, following her. "Come on!" he protested, wheezing a little as he walked into the kitchen—dust and screaming had not been a good combination. "Fifteen more minutes, *please!* We just ran into a Demogorgon, and Peter's rolling for a fireball—"

"No means no, Steve," Sarah said, reaching for a bowl of sauce. "Stephen just got home, and the pasta's getting cold. You'll finish next weekend."

"But it'll ruin the flow!" Steve protested.

"Steve—"

"I'm serious, Mom!" Steve cried. "It took us *weeks* to plan this, and the story can't continue if we take a *seven day* break!" He dropped his hands, watching as Sarah sprinkled shredded basil over the tomato sauce. "I didn't *know* it was going to take ten hours—"

"*Ten hours?*" Sarah looked up in disbelief. "You've been playing that game for *ten hours?*"

"We—" Steve broke off with a cough, face twisting in discomfort. Sarah's peeved expression instantly gave way to concern as she put her spoon down on the counter and dropped to her knees next to him.

"Steve?" She rubbed his back as he took in a deep, rattly breath. "Stevie? You alright?" He nodded and she sighed, shaking her head. "Look at you," she muttered, smacking dust from his shirt. "Shouting and crawling around with the dust bunnies—it's a wonder you

haven't had an attack already." She patted his shoulder and gave his hair a quick ruffle. "Alright," she said, standing up and giving him a quick peck on the forehead. "See your friends out, and get changed, got it?"

Steve nodded as Sam and Natasha came thundering up the stairs, pulling on jackets and hats. "Hey, Mrs. R," Sam nodded as he yanked his backpack straps over his arms.

"Hey," Natasha echoed, tugging on an Asgard Spiders baseball cap. "Thanks for having us."

"Oh, not a problem." Sarah smiled as Natasha plunked their mugs on the counter. "You're welcome anytime."

"Thanks!" Sam waved at her as the three of them walked out the door, Peter joining them as he walked down the stairs, a pizza box tucked under his arm, looking dejected.

"What's the matter with you?" Natasha asked as she zipped up her jacket and kicked her bike stand up, swinging a leg over it. "You looked like you just watched a puppy die."

"Nah," Peter shrugged, mounting his own bike. "Just tried to talk to Stephen—"

"Why?" Steve glanced at him. "He never comes down, you know that."

"But he's so *cool*!" Peter said. Steve let out a small huff. "I mean, come on!" Peter said. "He's gonna be a surgeon, and do science stuff, and cut people open—"

"He *used* to be cool, you mean," Sam snorted, flicking on his light. "Then he graduated, and started going to that fancy-ass college all the way in Jotunheim." Steve rolled his eyes, kicking one of his tires lightly. "Hey, watch it!"

Natasha snorted, kicking away from the ground and pedalling down the street. "Later!" she called, turning the corner.

"Hey, wait up!" Sam called, pedalling after her.

Steve laughed, tucking his hands into his pockets. Peter swung a leg

over his bike. Steve glanced at the younger boy, raising an eyebrow. "What?"

"It was a seven." Peter shrugged. "The Demogorgon. It got me."

Steve cocked a brow, but just chuckled. "Well, okay, then." He put a hand on his shoulder grinning. "You know what I always say: honesty is the best policy."

Peter rolled his eyes, shrugging his hand off. "See you tomorrow!" he called, pedalling after the other two.

"Bye!" Steve yelled, watching as Peter raised a hand, waving over his shoulder as he turned the corner. A sudden flash of darkness engulfed the street as the garage light flickered and he glanced up, frowning. The bulb spluttered again before returning to normal and he shrugged, turning to walk back into the house. "Mom?" he called. "I think the garage light's 'bout to burn out. . ."

XXX

Sam glanced up as Peter's bike screeched to a halt next to his. "Hey," he said. "What took you so long?" Peter muttered something, and the older boy furrowed his brow. "What?"

"May or may not have told Steve about the seven," Peter muttered, scuffing the pavement with his toe. Sam groaned, putting his head on his bike handles.

"Damnit, Parker!" Peter laughed, dodging a mock swipe. "Fine," he snorted. "Whatever. I don't care. But I'm not protecting you from Nat tomorrow, got it?"

Peter groaned, but there was laughter underneath. "Got it," he grinned. "Where is she?"

Sam jerked his head to the side. "Rode off without even saying goodbye. Jerk," he added fondly as he began pedalling again. Peter laughed as he fell in next to him, and, for a few minutes, they rode in comfortable silence, the creaking of their bike chains the only noise, save for the chirping of the crickets and the occasional loud bursts of noise as they passed houses.

"Hey," Sam said suddenly. "Wanna race?"

"What?" Peter glanced at him.

"You, me, race," Sam said. "Come on, not like we've got anything else to do. Tell you what," he added. "If I win, I get a front-row seat to you telling Nat you told Steve 'bout the seven. If you win, I'll give you my new comic book."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "What's the comic?"

Sam's grin was triumphant. "Spiderman. *First edition*."

"You're on." The reply was instantaneous.

Sam laughed as they stopped, adjusting their grips on the handles. "On three," he said. "One. . . two. . ."

"Three!" Peter kicked off, surging forwards, Sam barely a hair behind him.

"Oh, no you don't!" Sam growled, pedalling harder. Peter laughed as he rocketed ahead of the older boy, swerving around a curve at a speed that would've sent his late mother, bless her heart, into a fit of cardiac arrest. His laughter carried down the street as he turned onto Mirkwood Street, biking past a forest of thin, spindly trees, frail enough that they looked too weak to support their own weight. He spared the forest a quick glance, peering through the thin brush at the large, concrete building at the centre of it, surrounded by barbed wire.

The picturesque scene was shattered as, suddenly, a figure darted out of the forest. Peter was convinced that it was human-shaped, but it was moving leagues faster than anybody he'd ever seen—except, maybe, the Olympic runners he'd seen on TV. The dark silhouette ran into the street, and Peter yelled, jerking the handles to the side as the person turned to stare at him. Even under the light of the moon and stars, Peter still couldn't make out any features, though—call him crazy, but he could've sworn that he saw a glint of metal when the person raised their arm.

"*Argh!*" Peter's arms flew up instinctively, covering his face as he and

his bike tumbled off the side of the road, landing on the leafy, forest floor. He hissed as the branches and stones on the ground cut his skin and groaned, pushing himself up on his hands. He grimaced, the scrapes on his hands stinging as he stumbled to his feet. A tiny yelp escaped him as he put pressure on his left foot and looked down to see the hem of his sock soaked in blood.

"*Shit.*" He landed on his rump, wincing. "*Owww.*" He touched his foot and squeaked, drawing his hand away as if burned. He patted the blood off on his shirt, glancing around, trying to ignore the goosebumps running marathons up and down his back. He glanced around, searching for something he could use as a walking stick.

He let out a startled gasp, nearly leaping straight out of his skin as the light on his bike suddenly began flickering. Dark, light, dark, light—and on, and on, in a mesmerizing, unsettling pattern.

The sound of a branch cracking rang out like lightning through the eerie silence of the woods—for it truly *was* silent. The rustling of the branches had stopped, the wind having died down startlingly quickly, and even the crickets were silent.

Almost like they were waiting for something.

A second crack cut through the air like a gunshot, closer this time. Peter forced himself to his feet, keeping most of his weight on his right foot, looking around, shoulders tense.

He never even saw the first strike coming. He screamed as he was thrown into a tree, seeing stars as the back of his skull collided harshly with the trunk. He looked up through a haze of pain, world blurring and spinning as he stared at his attacker.

The figure straightened, silhouetted in the dull moonlight shining through the clouds. the arm that had hurled Peter into the tree dropping to its side as it stalked closer. It—because, whatever that *thing* was, it certainly wasn't a man. Everything about it was just. . . *wrong*. Limbs long and thin, spidery fingers on its one, bony arm nearly brushing the ground, head massive compared to its nearly stick-like body—not to mention that, as it wasn't wearing anything, it was clear enough to see that it was lacking certain. . . *parts*.

Peter tried to get up, to push himself into a sitting position, to raise his arms to defend himself—*anything*. But all he could succeed in was twitching the tips of his fingers as the creature stalked closer, raising its arm.

The flickering light on the bike suddenly burnt out with a crackling *pop*, sparks bouncing against the glass bulb. By the time the clouds had parted and the silvery moonlight shone down, Peter's bike was the only thing left in the woods, lying abandoned on its side in a pile of dead leaves.

The doctor at the beginning of the chapter's meant to be Debbie from Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. I haven't watched the show, and I have no clue who the fuck Debbie's supposed to be (I just looked for HYDRA scientists on the Wiki). But, apparently, she was only in two episodes, so I don't really care. Jezebel means 'an impure follower of idols'

Also, I took some liberty here, so the circumstances of Eleven/Bucky's powers, as well as his past, will differ from the original show, as will the existence of Hawkin/Asgard's Lab. The characters and events will be based more on the MCU than Stranger Things, but the main storyline follows S1 of Stranger Things.

2. I Can Hardly Wait (to Leave this Place)

So, Loki gets a bit high in this chapter. Just a little warning, in case that bothers you. Also, I have *not* snorted cocaine before; I got that info from the good old Internet (Much thanks to Quora and VerywellMind) (I sincerely hope nobody goes through my search history) (It's for research, I swear).

Tony. . .

Tony. . .

Tony!

Tony jolted awake with a start, gasping as he sat up, taking in large, deep, lungfuls of breath. "Ah, shit!" He grimaced, pressing the rough, calloused heel of his hand to his sweat-soaked forehead, temples throbbing, ears ringing.

He kicked his feet, mismatched sheets and blankets tangled around his legs, and tossed them to the side, bundling them against the wall. He swore as he stumbled, nearly tripping over an empty beer bottle. He scowled, running a hand through his hair, the already messy brown locks sticking up in different directions, slickened by sweat.

He rubbed his eyes as he stumbled out of his room, rubbing his eyes. "Underoos?" he called as he threw open the fridge, squinting against the light streaming from the inside of the icebox. "Pete!" He grabbed a handful of Eggos, a slight frown marring his features at the sight of the dwindling amount of food on the shelves.

He sighed, shaking his head as he stripped the waffles from their plastic bags. "C'mon, Pete!" he shouted, tossing them onto a plate and slamming the door of the repaired microwave shut and slumping against the counter, arms crossed on the surface. He grimaced for a moment at the half-empty mug of cold coffee on the counter before grabbing it and downing the entire thing in one go. "Agh." He made a gagging noise, wrinkling his nose, but swallowed it down anyways. He took another sip of the cold, stale drink—disgusting, but it helped

clear his hangover.

He glanced at his watch. 7:24. He furrowed his brow. *Pete's normally up by now.*

He turned, looking down the hallway, frowning as he put the mug, fresh stains piling on top of old ones, back on the tiled counter with a small *clink*. "Pete?" he called again, forcing himself into a standing position and walking down the hallway.

Tony rapped his knuckles against the wooden door, avoiding the areas where stained brown peeking out from where the white paint had chipped away, wincing as each sharp knock made his head throb just a bit more. "Underoos?" he asked. "Come on, what's up? Those waffles aren't gonna eat themselves, you know?" He frowned when, after a few more seconds, the room beyond the door remained stubbornly silent. "Pete?" He turns the doorknob slowly, finding it unlocked. "I'm coming in, all right?"

The door creaked open and Tony poked his head in. He frowned at the sight of the empty room: the window was slightly open, the morning breeze making the dark blue curtains, polka-dotted with white spots (Peter had insisted the old bedsheets looked like constellations, and it hadn't taken long for them to stitch them into decent drapes), drift about, dancing lazily in the faint rays of grey sunlight streaming in.

Tony picked his way through the Lego pieces scattered on the floor (Peter insisted that it had all been laid out in a precise order, all the better for him to find the right pieces—Tony still believed that he'd just turned the box upside down and shook it willy-nilly) and leaned out the window. He surveyed the empty yard, elbow propped on the half-finished computer the pair were putting together with scrap parts, frown deepening when he realized Peter's bike wasn't in its normal spot, nor anywhere else on the property.

Tony's frown deepened when he turned, spotting Peter's unmade bed, light blue sheets and patchwork quilt strewn about, not unlike Tony's own room. The caramel-haired boy always made it a point to make his bed every morning, if only to give himself a bit of a neat surface to do his homework on before pulling the covers over his head and

reading whatever book he'd snagged from some obscure, dusty corner of the house until Tony called him for dinner.

"Fuck!" Tony grimaced, grabbing his ears as the high-pitched beeping of the microwave broke him from his thoughts. He kept his hands clamped over his ears as he rushed back to the kitchen, pressing the large, blank button with his elbow.

He put the plate on the island, slamming the door shut with a peeved glare as he reached for the phone. He dialed the number quickly, glancing up at the list taped up on the wall. He did an awkward shimmy towards the counter, stretching one arm towards the plate of waffles the wire of the receiver pulled taut between him and the base.

Click.

"Hello?"

"Oh!" Tony raised an eyebrow as he finally managed to snag an Eggo, returning to the wall. "My, my." He grinned, taking a bite out of the corner of the batter cake. "What do we have here? The good doctor rears his head!"

Silence from the other end. "Mom!" Stephen calls, and Tony swears, voice muffled by his mouthful of waffle, dropping both the cake and the phone as loud, crackly bumps blasted through the earpiece. "It's for you."

"What the—" Tony scooped up both the Eggo and phone, headache back in full force, with renewed vengeance. "Did you *throw* the *fucking pho*—oh, hey, Mrs. R!"

"Tony!" Tony wrinkled his nose at the dust bunny-infested waffle in his hand and tossed it into the trashcan. "How are you?"

"Fantastic," Tony said, reaching over to the table and picking up another waffle (sliding the plate closer to the edge as he did so). "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Sarah said airily. In the background, he heard the *thunk* of a jar being put down on the counter; she must have been

making sandwiches for Steve's lunch. "What are you calling about?" she asked, voice slightly muffled—Tony guessed she'd probably pressed the receiver to her shoulder. "Did Peter forget something?"

"Hm." Tony reached up, wiping a few crumbs from his lips. "Oh, yeah, no." He swallowed, wrinkling his nose at the discomfort of the too-big bite of waffle forcing its way down his throat. "No, no. Uh, hey. . . Pete didn't happen to sleep over last night, did he?"

"What?" Sarah frowned, detecting the note of anxiety in Tony's voice. "No, no he didn't. He biked home with Natasha and Sam."

"Oh." Tony blinked, licking the crumbs off his lips. "Oh. Okay. Okay."

"Tony?" Sarah's voice comes through the earpiece, full of concern. "Tony, are you alright? Did Peter not come home last night?"

"No." Tony shook his head. "I mean—" He shook his head again, despite knowing damn well she couldn't see him, trying to ignore the mounting pressure on his chest. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Tony?" Sarah asked again. "Are you—"

"Fine!" Tony interrupted. "I mean—" He took a deep breath. "He probably just left early."

"Alright." Sarah doesn't sound convinced. "Call me if you need anything—*anything*—okay?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded, taking a deep breath. "Thanks, Mrs. R." He hung up the phone and turned, rushing to the front of the house, stopping by the door.

Peter's shoes? *Here.*

Peter's jacket? *Here.*

Peter's backpack, open and slumping against the wall, books and crumpled papers shoved in? *Here.*

Tony gripped his hair tightly in one hand, slumping against the wall.

"*Shit.*"

XXX

Natasha's bike skidded to a halt, tires bumping against the rough asphalt of the path as she hopped off, kicking the stand down before it had even come to a complete stop.

Steve pulled off his helmet, pushing his bike into the rack. "That's weird," he commented.

Natasha glanced up from where she knelt next to her own bike, padlocking it to the rack. "What?"

"Where's Peter?" Steve asked, bundling up his knee and elbow pads, shoving them into his backpack.

Natasha shrugged, giving her bike lock a quick kick and tucking the key into her backpack. "Dunno," she said. "Maybe he's with Sam."

"Who's with Sam?" The older boy's bike rammed into the rack with a clatter, and Steve jumped, swearing. "What were you saying?" Sam asked, swinging his leg over the bike and hopping off, ignoring Steve's splutters.

Natasha frowned, craning her neck to peer over Sam's shoulder. "Pete with you?"

Sam furrowed his brow as he hitched his backpack a bit higher on his shoulder. "Thought he was with you."

"Thought he was with *you*," Steve said.

Sam hesitated for a moment before shrugging. "Probably nothing to worry about," he said as they began walking across the blacktop towards the school. "Maybe he just left early or someth—"

"Well, well, well!" The three froze, and Natasha groaned as they turned around together.

Flash Thompson sauntered up towards them, clapping his hands slowly. "Would you look at this?" He turned to grin at the lackeys standing behind him. "Looks like the carnival's back in town!" Josh

Heere chuckled and Alex Johnson leered at the trio.

"Fuck off, Thompson," Natasha snapped.

Flash ignored her, continuing his tirade. "Say." He swaggered towards them, in an almost ridiculous fashion, smirking cockily. "Who'd you think would win grand prize in the freakshow?" He shoved Sam in the shoulder, though the thin, wiry boy barely budged. "Beanpole?" He kicked Steve's shin, causing the blond to grimace slightly "The Soviet?" Natasha bared her teeth, glaring at Flash as he nodded at her, sneering.

"I'm from *Lafayette*," she snapped. "Not that you'd have enough brain cells to tell the difference, *Eugene*."

"Sure thing, *Soviet*," Josh snickered.

Alex tucked his chin in, rolling his eyes. "*Too pizza*," he imitated, jowls drooping. The pair howled with laughter, as if it were the most hilarious thing they'd ever heard.

"It's *Мудак*, dimwits," she snarled.

Flash threw his head back, cackling. "Yeah, sure," he snorted. He glanced around, raising an eyebrow. "Our little circus troupe's missing a member, isn't it?" he remarked. "Where's Penis?"

"His name's *Peter*, fuckwad," Sam growled.

"*His name's Peter, fuckwad*," Alex imitated, dropping his chin again. Josh began laughing, but stopped when Flash scowled, kicking him in the side of the leg.

"So, Parker's a no-show?" Flash scoffed, nostrils flaring as Alex winced behind him. "Finally decided to do the smart thing and stay home? Or," his sneered at the trio, "is he stuck at home cleaning up his fuckup of a cousin's hangover—"

Flash cut off with a scream, throwing his hands up in front of his face as Natasha lunged, fist flying at his face. Her arm froze, knuckles barely brushing his arms, and he peeked out from behind his makeshift shield.

"Fuck you," Natasha snarled, drawing her hand away. "ублюдок."

"Yeah, that's right!" Flash called after them as they shoved open the heavy doors, walking into the school. "Run!"

"What a piece of shit," Sam grumbled as they navigated the halls, heading towards their lockers.

"Son of a bitch," Natasha agreed.

Steve nodded, but didn't say anything as he looked around. "I don't see Peter," he said.

Sam shrugged. "It's a big school," he said. "I don't think we need to worry about him."

Steve nodded again, though he still looked troubled. "Shit—the sixth-graders aren't in this wing, are they?"

Natasha shook her head, dropping her backpack on the ground as they reached her locker. "Don't be such a mother duck," she said, spinning the lock. "I'm sure we'll see him at lunch."

"Don't worry about it," Sam reassured him as Steve furrowed his brow. "Tony probably dropped Peter off today. I'm sure it's fine."

XXX

The paper wrapping of the plastic straw drifted to the ground, discarded carelessly, as the end of the straw was placed over the line of white laid out neatly on top of the toilet paper dispenser.

The cocaine vanished up his nostril, and Loki took a deep breath, shaking his head slightly, greasy black locks flicking against his face, tip of his tongue flicking out to wet his lips at the sensation of the grainy substance making its way down his throat.

He took a deep breath, leaning against the door, a familiar warmth slowly beginning to spread through him, fingertips tingling slightly, breaths coming quicker as his heartbeat became erratic, tranquility rushing through him as his clenched fists loosened. He opened his mouth and inhaled deeply, blinking slowly as he stared up at the

ceiling light, the white noise around him fading to an almost inaudible buzz.

He didn't move as the bathroom door banged open, slamming into the wall hard enough to make the stalls rattle slightly, eyelids drooping slightly. "Hey!" His lids slid shut and he parted his lips, exhaling slowly. "You in here, Lokes?"

Loki's lips quirked up at the corners as he reached behind him, unlocking the door and sliding out of the stall with surprising grace. "Stark," he greeted.

Tony opened his mouth, but paused, eyes flicking over his dilated pupils and the beads of sweat beginning to gather on the crooked bridge of his nose. "Are you high?"

"Maybe." Loki grinned holding up the straw, held nimbly between two fingers. He leaned forwards a bit, taking a deep breath, wrinkling his nose at the sour, alcoholic smell clinging to Tony, putting a damper on his mounting high. "And you're drunk."

"No, I—well, *was* drunk. Not anymore."

"Makes no difference to me." Loki shrugged, tapping his breast pocket, the emerald-green plaid lumpy where another small, plastic bag was shoved in. "You want some?"

Tony seemed to hesitate for a moment before shaking his head, brown strands of his bird's nest flapping about. "Not now," he said. "Listen—"

"Shame," Loki sang, tossing the straw over Tony's head. It landed on the ground, nowhere near the trash can. Not that it was a problem; he left enough white smudges on the dispenser for the faculty to know there was cocaine in the school, and it wasn't as if he was the only student who made a habit of taking part in recreational activities. "Next time then." He shook his hair out, room tilting a bit as he raised his hand, pushing the raven locks back. "What're you after, then? As much I'd love to have a chat right now, I really *must* get back to class—"

"You know," Tony grumbled. "Sometimes, I really hate it when you're riding the white horse."

"Not like you minded last Thursday." Loki grinned, leaning back against the stall. "If you're not down for it right now, we can always head over to my place after school—"

"Seriously, Gloomy Dooms, not now." Tony said, urgency creeping into his voice. Loki raised an eyebrow, tilting his head lazily. "Listen—is your brother home?"

"My *brother!*" Loki raised his head, blinking as he tilted his chin up. "Whatever for, Stark? I thought we were in this for the long run! You know—" He raised a fist, pumping it lightly. "The whole 'teenage delinquent' gig. Why would you abandon such fun just to run off to that bearded bore—"

"It's not about me," Tony said. "Look, I ran to the station earlier, but they said he wasn't there, and I called your place, but he didn't pick up, and I really don't want to hand this over to those fuckwits over at the station."

Loki raised an eyebrow, blinking slowly. "Well, this sounds serious," he said. "Perhaps I'll be able to help you if you stop and tell me what the problem is."

"It's—" Tony pursed his lips, fingers tapping his thigh frantically. "It's about Peter," he said. Loki raised an eyebrow. "I don't—" His other hand tangled in his jacket pocket, fiddling with the fraying edges of the worn red fabric. "He wasn't in the house this morning," he said. "All is stuff was still there, but his bike wasn't." Loki frowned. "I don't want to make too big of a deal out of it, because—" He gripped his hair, scratching his head. "Look, I've already got an offense on my record," he said, holding his hands up. "If any authorities found out Peter 'poofed!' when I'm his legal guardian."

Loki hummed, eyes narrowing. "I see," he said, nodding. "You need someone who can look into this without, ah, risking yours and the kid's position, correct?"

"Yes, Edgar Allen Poe, that's exactly—you know what I mean!"

"Stark. . ." Loki sighed, rolling his shoulders. "You should know at this point that *I* know what you mean." He pointed at Tony as he spoke, swivelling the finger around to aim it at himself.

"So you'll help?"

"I'm not sure what you think that drunken lug's going to be able to do for you, but sure."

XXX

Light flashed off of Arnim's glasses as he stood on the steps of the lab, watching the cars come down the drive, the gates sliding shut behind them. Behind him, the guard—an unassuming, bald man, guns hidden in the inner pockets of his suit jacket and a taser tucked into his pocket where a radio should be—stepped closer, hands crossed in front of him.

The cars slowed to a stop in front of him, almost completely silent. The back, passenger door swung open, and a man in a grey suit stepped out, straightening his blazer and running a hand over his hair.

"Dr. Zola," the man greeted, holding out a hand and smiling a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Mr. Pierce," Arnim replied, accent lightened by his years spent in America, but noticeable nonetheless. He gripped his hand, shaking firmly as another man exited the car behind Pierce, glancing around as he stood up straight. "How was your journey?"

"Oh, nothing to worry about." Pierce smiled again, eyes cold. "I'd love to keep chatting," he continued. "But I do believe we have more pressing matters to attend to."

"Ah, of course." The fake smiles dropped, tension thickening in the air. Pierce released Arnim's hand, straightening the lapels of his suit as the car drove off, vanishing into the parking lot, and the guards around them began speaking in hushed voices to each other and into radios. "Please, come this way."

XXX

Spots of black slime were splattered across the wall, some splotches still bubbling and sizzling, sprays of blood dotted around them. Grey flakes drifted through the air, illuminated like dust particles in the dancing spotlights of the industrial-grade flashlights. Pierce lifted his foot carefully, stepping over a long, black. . . thing on the ground—it almost looked like a tentacle, or, perhaps, a vine, snaking across the floor, coated in a thick layer of slime.

"There it is." Zola's voice cut through the eerie, hollow silence, voice muffled through his hazmat suit.

Rumlow took the lead, raising his arm and moving aside a curtain of the tentacle-vines, the black slime sticking to the white of his suit, too his obvious distaste.

Alexander walked forwards, passing through the half-collapsed doorway (the door itself lay a few feet away, the heavy metal dented and crushed, hinges shattered), eyes wide in what was almost awe. There were more vines on this side of the door—piled on top of each other, stretching out from the other side of the room, where they climbed up the walls, wrapped around the hole in the wall. The metal lining the walls of the room had been forcefully removed, looking almost as if someone had grabbed the sheets and peeled them away, revealing what was beneath them.

And what a sight it was.

Behind the metal sheets, rather than beams or the outside world, there was a thin membrane, the beams of the flashlight reflecting off the muscle-pink substance—soft and squishy to the touch, but hard and unyielding as steel. There seemed to be lights moving *inside* of the membrane, tendrils of red pulsing within. More vines were criss-crossed over it, the black slime dripping slowly onto the floor and onto the glowing wall. The air around the membrane seemed to be danker, the white flakes in the air more concentrated, a thin layer littering the ground and lower vines.

"That's where it came from?" Rumlow asked, to which another scientist muttered a quiet affirmation.

"I would not advise approaching, Mr. Pierce," Zola said as Alexander

made to step closer. "While we are positive that it left the confines of the lab last night, there is always a chance that it—or something else—could appear."

Alexander nodded, eyes fixed on the membrane—a silly name, really, for something so powerful and consequential. "What about the Asset?" he asked.

"We are not sure," Zola replied, the first hints of uneasiness appearing in his voice. "We are—well, we are positive that he escaped last night —"

"With the help of the creature?" Rumlow interrupted.

"We are not sure," Zola said, quietly, apologetically.

"How can you not know?"

"The existence of the creature was only recently uncovered, and the possibility of the boy having been in contact with it beforehand—"

"Enough." Alexander's voice cut through the bickering, breath misting on his mask. "We haven't got any time for this, right now. Zola," he ordered. "Collect whatever samples you need, and then prepare the Asset's holding chamber."

"Sir." The scientist nodded.

"Rumlow." The dark-haired man turned to look at Alexander. "Take your team and spread out. Find him."

"Got it, sir."

Title's from Home by Three Days Grace (because I'm emmmooooooooooooooooo ())